

A Man Made For These Times

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Summary: In the week following Gordon Freeman's destruction of Nova Prospekt, in the beginning of the City 17 general Uprising, Barney Calhoun has an encounter with a mysterious man, and begins to wonder if anyone can truly be made for times like these.

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By Mitchell Dickinson

His boots slid across the debris choked street, his heart beating double-time, in concert with his ragged breath. The trek from station six had been a whirlwind of winding streets, crab-filled alleys, and machinegun nests. At least three times he had to detour around an intersection because the Citadel's crawling walls had nearly smashed into him.

Needless to say, Barney Calhoun wasn't having a great day.

What he wouldn't have given for a GPS. _Shit, even a working map would make my day._ He thought.

Three days and nights of interminable fighting had begun to take it's toll. Running a gloved hand through his hair, he could see the shine of grease and grime on the faded leather. He was dirtier than usual, and _that_ was saying something. The last time he'd seen the inside of a shower had been two days before the rebellion had broken out, and with all the skirting around from one piece of cover to another hardened position had left little time for his own personal hygiene.

But that didn't matter, what did matter is he make it to Sevastopol Avenue. The rebels there were pinned down, taking fire from several well-entrenched Overwatch units. The com chatter had been sparse, but

from what he could tell, they were determined to take a supply depot located near the front line, ever closer to the Citadel. The depot's equally determined defenders, though, had other plans in mind. If they could take the building, they'd secure a treasure trove of food and water. While bullets and rockets had been in abundant supply, the rebel brass hadn't counted on actually needing to feed their troops, and all the bullets in the world were useless if the men firing them were starving. Barney's own stomach lurched, he knew firsthand what hunger does to one's aim.

He felt the crunch of glass beneath his feet, and looked down and saw the remnants of a shattered Breenscreen; probably the work of some over-zealous insurgent. But the crunching echoed off the walls of the street, and gave his pause.

He really hoped he hadn't heard what he _thought_ he heard. But his hopes were dashed when the chatter of Combine radio, accompanied by a hail of nine-millimeter, hollow-point death cracked the relative silence of the empty intersection.

Ducking his head and grabbing his own pistol, Barney made for the nearest alley. Breathing an ironic sigh, he grinned, knowing his goose wasn't cooked just yet, as Civil Protection were the only ones issued sidearms, so it couldn't possibly be Overwatch... just yet, anyways.

In the distance he heard the unmistakable sound of artillery arching overhead. He looked up in time to see a headcrab launcher, it's contour a stark white tail against the clear blue sky, sail through the air, and smack into an adjacent building. The masonry that made up the now-ancient structure crumbled into the alley, blocking his way.

So his goose wasn't cooked, but the oven was definitely set to broil.

Soon one end of the alley would be crawling with crabs, and the other would be cordoned off by Civil Protection, Barney didn't like his odds.

But if Gordon has taught me anything, its that, with a little creative thinking, you can always swing the odds in your favour.

Unclipping one of the two precious grenades from his belt, he made his way for the nearby dumpster.

The trio of Civil Protection officers cautiously made their way down the alley, their pistols at the ready. They'd seen the traitor slip this way, and had given chase. Orders on high, from Overwatch Central AI, had made Officer Calhoun a priority target. Though not as important as Anti-Citizen One, taking him down might just earn them a ticket out of this hell hole.

"Overwatch, sub-prime Calhoun engaged. Standby." The lead officer reported.

"Autonomous units, mandate, sub-prime Calhoun, expunge. Remove active signature imprin..." But the officer hurriedly clicked his radio off.

"I know the standing orders. Come on, fellas, lets get this over with." The men scanned the alley. One of them noted the dumpster, and motioned to his superior.

"Shit, we've got free biotics!" One of the CP's yelled as the headcrabs began crawling out of the rubble. Though at this range they were easy targets for the practiced marksmen. Barney could hear the thump of their hollowpoints making short work of the crabs, and blessed his lucky stars it wasn't his ammo that was being wasted.

Finally as the last of the last of them were dispatched, the lead officer motioned for the other two to take up position on either side of the dumpster.

"Alright Calhoun, you know the drill as well as anyone." The leader crackled, slowly lifting the cover. "Autonomous judgement is in effect, and if you play nice, I might just put a bullet in your head, rather than have them ship you off to..." But as he lifted the lid, he heard the string snap, and the unmistakable tick of a grenade.

"Dismount! Dismount!" He cried, but before they could make for harder cover, the dumpster ripped itself open from the inside, splattering their bodies across the pavement.

As the smoke cleared, Calhoun crawled out from beneath the piece of corrugated aluminum he'd been hiding under and surveyed the carnage. Entrails and body parts littered the alley, a gruesome sight to be sure.

"Argh..." he turned and saw the top half of one of the CP's slowly crawling away from the wreckage, trailing his own intestines, leaving behind him a bloody path. Calhoun knelt down beside the man, and turned his head up. Half of his mask had shattered, displaying the pale, disorientated face below. A shudder ran up his spine, as the man locked him in a staring contest with his one exposed eye. Blood welled up from his mouth, and he tried to form words. The man noticed the gun in Calhoun's hand and looked at him again, squinting, moving his mouth as if to say something.

"A plea?" Barney looked at the weapon, and back at the officer. Shaking, he held the weapon up to the broken man's head. Closing his eyes, the CP sighed, more crimson blood pooling around his chin.

But he never pulled the trigger. Barney sat there for several seconds, barrel trembling violently against his temple. "Why can't I do it?" He'd killed dozens of Civil Protection and Overwatch over the last 72 hours. The men fixed him with another stare, as if waiting for the end to come. As the seconds turned into minutes, finally the Civil Protection officer slowly slipped into unconsciousness.

A long winded beep sounded from the CP's vest, indicating his vital's had finally ceased. Overwatch, ever insightful, chimed off the officer's death with chilling nonchalance.

"Attention, ground protection teams, Civil Protection team down at...zone Industry Alpha-four, all available units please report..." Barney took the com and smashed it under his jackboot, silencing the

Overwatch AI.

Collecting the extra magazines, Barney took one last look at the body and asked himself again, why couldn't he do it? He thought he knew. While he'd been part of Civil Protection he'd... done things, unconscionable things. But he'd never killed an unarmed person. Taking a life was different from defending yourself, the years had taught him that. But maybe this war would require him to do just that, to take life.

But he hadn't reached that point, yet. He hadn't yet had to take that step. Maybe he wasn't meant for these times. Maybe it would take someone else to finally finish the job.

But he'd be damned if he wouldn't live to find out.

* * *

><p>Barney knew taking the detour through the parking garage would be bad idea, but when had he ever listened to his own advice? There could be god-knows what down there, breeding right under the nose of the Citadel's anti-infection scrubbers. He'd heard tell that just the other week Civil Protection had encountered a whole nest of snarks, in an abandoned part of the city. The whole section, and the surrounding neighborhoods had been quarantined, as Airwatch flew in those... those things, that they always used to clean up "infections". The cremators had filed out of the dropship, their zombie-like gate reminded him of what happened to anyone that boarded a train on the Nova Prospekt line. Even the robotic soldiers who served as their handlers seem to keep a respectable distance.<p>

Shaking his thoughts away, he held his pistol out in front of him, determined to make his way through the parking garage unscathed. If memory served, it should take him the better part of three blocks closer to his target, three blocks that he was positive were crawling with Overwatch, entrenched and waiting for unsuspecting rebels to stumble into their fields of overlapping fire, cutting them into unrecognisable shreds.

The garage was silent as a tomb, which made Calhoun even more cautious. He expected to find something down here, a small clutch of crabs, or even a lone bullsquid, but finding nothing was making him even more nervous.

Crawling over the hood of a dilapidated _Lada_, he slipped over the other side just as a concentrated volley of pulse rifle fire disintegrated the windshield. Suddenly his mind was on overdrive.

Shit, shit, shit. He knew it was too good to be true. Maybe the Citadel AI's message had actually reached someone, and they'd come looking for him. Or maybe it was a trap, or with his luck, it was just a terrible accident that he'd run into a squad. Zig-zagging between car wrecks, he popped his head up, trying to take stock of how many he was dealing with.

His face paled when he saw a flash of white move behind a pillar. Overwatch elites against a rebel armed with nothing more than a pea-shooter? He'd be lucky if his nine-millimeters could make a dent

in their armor.

"Sub-prime Calhoun re-aquired, standby." One of the Elite's radio's hissed. More pulse fire peppered the car behind which he'd taken cover. OSPIR rounds bore red-hot holes through the rusting metal, filling his nose with the tinge of ozone.

Taking his chances, he ran from behind cover, desperately looking for a more hardened target, and hoping against hope that the exit was close by.

"Subject is attempting to flee." The emotionless response came, as more fire was directed his way. Blue-tinged death pockmarked the asphalt in front of and behind him as he dove for the relative safety of a thick support pillar.

Clutching his last grenade, Barney Calhoun once again took stock of his options. He'd seen three, maybe four units trying to amble their way between the rusted hunks that filled the garage. They'd be slow to close in on him with so much debris in the way, but it was only a matter of time.

Again, he didn't like his odds.

The boot steps sounded even closer now, but he wasn't sure if it was the acoustics of what was sure to be his tomb, or if it had come from behind...

The crunch of boots on rubble nearby gave him cause to pirouette around, his finger on the trigger.

"Need some help, security guard?" Barney couldn't believe what he was looking at. His finger twitched nervously as the soldier in front of him held his old-world rifle in a comically relaxed manner. The urban camouflage took Calhoun back almost two decades, and a mixture of hatred, relief and wonder caused him to take his finger off the trigger, but keep his weapon trained on the man.

"You're..." The masked soldier was out of time, his fatigues were crisp, almost new. Calhoun hadn't seen anything like that since... since...

"You want to point that thing the other way?" The voice said, muffled by the gas-mask he wore. As if the beating of his heart had drowned out all the sounds around him, the crackle of pulse fire sounded rushed towards him as the soldier motioned him to follow. Barney stood dumb as the man expertly maneuvered around the garage, dodging the Elite's well-aimed shots. _"Are you coming, or do I have to tell your friends where to find your corpse?"_ Barney heard him yell.

Taking several deep breaths, Calhoun ran from behind the pillar as the Marine dismounted from cover and let off several rounds, the five-five-six ammunition sounding like a cannon in his ears. His vision seem to blur at the edges as he ran through the hail of pulse fire that answered. Sliding next to his newfound ally, he took several precious seconds to ask him a single question.

"How did you make it out of Black Mesa?!" His fear raising his voice to an octave he wasn't quite comfortable with.

The soldier ejected a spent magazine and slapped another one in, pulling the receiver back in one quick, fluid movement.

"I didn't." Was his only reply. Calhoun turned and looked through the broken window of the car and saw three Elite Overwatch units converging on their position. Turning back, he saw the soldier stand and take aim, letting off several rounds. He could hear the impact, but no resulting casualty. The soldier bent down, and Barney saw the name on the uniform, above the left breast pocket. "They don't go down easy." He grunted, but stopped when he saw the grenade clipped to Barney's waist. Reaching out with his fingerless gloves, he asked, "May I?" Calhoun didn't bother responding. "Move left, draw their fire."

"Yeah, because I had every intention of being used as bait today." Calhoun sarcastically replied. The former marine grabbed him by the arm, locking stares with him through the illuminated green lenses of the mask.

"Do you want to die down here?!" He growled. Barney didn't.

Nodding he moved from behind the car and fired his pistol wildly into the fray. "Hey uglies! Over here!" Immediately the Elites focused their fire on him, tearing holes through steel and concrete. Unlike Civil Protection, they obviously had no intention of taking him prisoner.

All the noise and the fire melded into one cacophony of dismay as Barney ran for his life, but now he only had one reason to live. To find out how this bastard had lived, and make him pay.

The marine waited till the soldiers were clustered, taking up firing positions behind a car that seemed to be the least in disrepair. Pulling the pin from the grenade, he stood up and tried to gauge the distance, throwing the explosive in a wide arc, the evil red eye seemed to leave a trail behind it in the darkness.

It bounced off the trunk of one car and ricocheted against the side of another, coming to rest just below the car the Elite's had taken cover behind.

There was no way to know if the car had any gasoline in it. Left for years rusting in one place probably hadn't been kind to the tank or its contents, but he was proven right when the grenade went off, and blew what was left of the car into the air, killing two of the soldiers, and crushing the third.

For a time there was silence, not even the ever-present Overwatch AI had anything to say about the spectacle. Barney crawled out from under the bed of a truck and watched as his would-be saviour walked towards what was left of the fire team, his rifle at the ready. Rivers of burning gasoline pooled around and cauterized the blood and gore that was strewn around the parking structure.

One of the soldiers, crushed beneath the wreckage of the car, twitched and groped for his pulse rifle, but the marine kicked it away. Barney stood by as the Elite looked up at the soldier silently, asking no quarter. A shot rang out, and the back of the white helmet

blew chunks of brain and augmented circuitry across the floor.

Calhoun fixed the marine with a glare, but it wasn't returned as the soldier knelt down and collected the rifle. He looked it over, as if it were a totally foreign object to him, but he froze when he heard the click of a firing hammer being pulled back, and slowly rose to his feet.

"Don't you freaking move!" Calhoun yelled, his voice thankfully sounding more authoritarian this time. This time, the marine met his glare with one of his own.

"If you're going to shoot, do it." He growled, stepping forward, though he never raised the pulse rifle, still gripping it awkwardly, as if holding it out to give it to Barney.

"All of you died, died in that hellhole, where you deserved to be." Calhoun snarled. "How did you survive?" The soldier didn't move, never shifted his gaze from the pistol Barney held him at bay with.

"Not all of us." He replied, quietly.

"You killed innocent people! My co workers," his voice cracked. "My... friends."

"My friends died there too, same as yours. We weren't all like..."

But Barney didn't want to hear it, he'd spent twenty years watching people murder each other, for nothing. "Shut up!" The pistol jumped with the beating of his furious, indignant heart. "Just shut up! None of you were supposed to live. Black Mesa was leveled."

The man surprised him by saying, "I know, I tried to stop it. I defused the nuke myself." His voice grew softer. "But he rearmed it, I don't know how, but he did." He stepped closer to Calhoun, but never threatened to turn the weapon on him. "There were good men there, my friends did their best to get what was left of the science team out, alive."

"Bullshit! I said the bodies, I saw the executions."

"That wasn't me, and that wasn't my men."

"How do I know-"

"Walter Bennet." The name gave Barney pause. "My friends found him in the dormitories."

The barrel of Calhoun's gun lowered slightly, his face a mask of confusion. "Walter never told me... how he escaped."

"He's alive?" The optimism was unmistakable.

"No... I mean, yes." Finally the gun fell to his side, the soldier visibly relaxed. "He is...was...a prisoner, they captured him some years back... I tried to find him, but they kept shuffling him from city to city."

"He's a tough civie, I wouldn't be surprised if he was still alive."

Calhoun grinned. "Obviously you didn't know Walter."

_"He put a round in the vest of one of the Marines who found him. I don't know how tough these guys are," _he motioned to the lifeless Elites_. "but Marines are tough as nails, and that goes double for Jackson."_ There was silence for a moment, then the soldier proffered Barney the pulse rifle. _"Don't you have somewhere to be?"_

* * *

><p>The two men made their way out of the garage in silence. Ten minutes later, Barney could literally see the light at the end of the tunnel. The echoes of looming gunships and rocket vollies filled the void, and Calhoun almost felt more at ease for it. The exit to the garage opened up onto a second story parapet, the off ramp having crumbled years ago. The two men stood on the makeshift balcony and surveyed the desolate landscape. The soldier took a seat on a slab of concrete, and took stock of his ammunition.<p>

"Those white ones are packing some serious armor." He said, flatly. Barney took a seat and set the pulse rifle in front of him.

"Sure you don't want it, the pulse rounds'll burn a neat little hole through 'em." The marine studied the weapon from his spot and shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't even know what end to hold." Barney wasn't sure if that was supposed to be a joke or not, so he remained silent. _"Besides, you can't run around with that pop gun, or you're liable to get yourself into trouble, and I won't be around to save your ass._" Calhoun grinned despite himself, then he remembered something the man had said.

"You said he rearmed the bomb. Who were you talking about?" The soldier was quiet for awhile.

"You have any water?" The odd question made Calhoun think, then he reached around, and unhooked a canteen from his belt, and handed it to the man. He quietly took off his helmet, and laid it gently next to his feet, then he did the same with his gas mask.

Barney saw the creased lines, indents that curved around his face from having the mask on too long, from his temples down and around the stubble that lined his chin. A burst of machinegun fire nearby drew his attention down the street, obscuring Calhoun's view of the rest of his face, but now his voice sounded clearer, and he noticed a soft character to it, something he hadn't expected.

"I haven't had water in... god, I don't know how long." The way he said it, Barney wasn't sure, but it sounded like the man truly had no idea when it was he had last had water. He saw him take a drink, then pour a small amount of the precious liquid on his head, letting it slowly flow over his face and neck.

After a few moments, Barney was about to ask the question again, when the soldier held the canteen out, offering it back to him. "I don't

know who he is, but he's obviously powerful. Maybe as powerful as they are..." He said, nodding in the direction of the Citadel, it's blue metal gleaming in the midday light. "Are they... are they in every city?"

Barney took a sip as well, wiping the little that fell onto the stubble of five days worth of a life without a razor. "All the cities that survived, yeah. I couldn't tell you how many are left, I know they number them, and the highest number I ever heard of was City 38. We're in City 17 now."

"What about... him." This time, Barney knew who he was talking about.

"You mean Gordon? Yeah he's still alive, well, at least he was, till about a week ago. He's been missing since he blew up a Combine outpost; that's what started..." He nodded in the direction of all the fighting. "This."

"I think he's still alive." The marine said quietly. "I think... I think that's why I'm here. I need to find him." Barney tensed.

"I heard you boys were told to kill him."

"Those were the only orders I was ever given. I was never told to kill the science team, just to capture or kill the man that... that started all this."

"You're wrong, Gordon had nothing to do with this! He was set up, and used as a scape..."

"I've obviously been_ wrong_ about a lot of things." The soldier interrupted him. Grabbing his mask and helmet, he donned both and turned to Barney.

"I think we both have places to be, Mr. Security Guard." He offered Barney a hand up, which he cautiously took.

"It's Calhoun... Barney Calhoun." The marine nodded.

"Call me Corporal Shephard." As if his rank still meant anything in this time, but Barney nodded just the same.

"What are you going to do now?" Calhoun asked, but suddenly his long-forgotten radio chirped to life.

"ZZzzzzZZz...negative, Commander NediÄ† pushed ahead through a set of roadblocks just now. We haven't reestablished communication with them yet, but the ammo carriers should be reporting back soon."

"Shit, I can't believe he's still alive." Barney swore at the radio. Shephard cocked his head.

"One of yours?" Calhoun shook his head and shouldered the pulse rifle.

"No, just some crazy bastard with a death wish, he and his tag-alongs have been tearing down checkpoints just to see them burn." Shephard pulled his sidearm from his holster, a menacing looking desert eagle, and pulled the action back slightly, checking to make sure a round

was nestled tightly in the chamber.

"Explosions and burning bad guys? Sounds like my kind of party." Barney fixed him with a stare.

"When...if you see NediÄ†, tell him a bit of discretion would go a long way to keep him from getting strung up outside a Civil Protection station." But Shephard was already uncoiling a rappelling rope and securing it, getting ready to make his way to street level.

"No promises." Was all he had to say. Barney watched him slide down the rope, hitting the street at a run. He watched him for almost two blocks, before the thought of the incursion at Sevastopol began itching at the back of his mind.

Barney Calhoun may have lived through these times, but this man, this marine, as out of his time as he was... he was probably the one person made for them.

And he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but he said a silent prayer for his friend, Gordon, and hoped that if those two ever met, that it wouldn't end like all the death he had seen today.

* * *

><p>AN: It's been... wow, forever since I wrote anything. But here it is, hopefully the first of more uploads and updates. I'm still working on Shephard Epic, but I needed to get the creative juices flowing, and this seemed as good a way as any.

First and foremost, I would like to let it be known that a terrible case of intellectual theft has occurred. On the website valvetime, a person known as "TheEpicShephard" has stolen my work and claimed it for his own. While I don't think I'm a very talented writer, it makes me seethe with anger that someone would steal my work. It's one thing to publish without permission, everyone loves a little free advertising, its another thing to publish it as your own. So I have one thing to say to this person, whomever they may be.

"Get off your lazy ass and write your own damn story, you no-talent hack. And do us all a favour and leave Corporal Shephard alone, you obviously don't deserve to write a character as fascinating as him. Start out with some tellytubby fanfiction. Oh, and if you're going to steal someone's work and claim it as your own, do them a favour AND DON'T JUST COPY AND PASTE ONTO A FORUM YOU TROGLODYTE, IT DOESN'T CARRY OVER ANY OF THE PUNCTUATION AND MAKES IT LOOK LIKE A CHILD WROTE IT."

WHEW! I appreciate you letting me publicly vent my frustration. So, with that off my chest, I will now be signing my work with my real name, since I'm sure the NSA has all my stories, as well as anyone else who has written on this site, on some server deep within a secret government base in the rocky mountains, right next to a Stargate, a dead alien body from Roswell, and the last "Tab" soda vending machine on the planet. Feel free to add me on Facebook, but I won't promise to add you, as I'm in a huge techno-phobe.

SuperChocolateBear is an exception.

But, needless to say now that my name's out on "teh interwebs", I'm a 25 year old guy working in finance who has a love for physics that was born out of playing Half-life when I was just in grade school who now writes half-life fanfiction in his room with a small, half-poodle mutt named Darwin who spends most of his time as I write these stories warming my feet somewhere in the Pacific Northwest.

This is more of an "alternate reality" fic. This isn't something that would appear in Shephard's Epic, but I saw a piece of deviant art once, and forgive me for not giving a reference as I can't, for the life of me, find the original work, and it has always inspired me to write something like this. It depicts Shephard appearing to aid Barney against a trio of Elites. If anyone knows where to find it, please leave it in the reviews for others to reference.

Also, I always love the idea of trying to reference other works in mine, with all due credit. I was was incredibly lucky that, before I disappeared, SCB had been kind enough to reference my work in his own. FF . net has such a collection of amazing writers, especially in the Half-Life section, who are much better at their craft than I will ever be, and aside from SuperChocolatebear's work, Khevsureti's "Uncivil Souls" is probably my favourite work of fiction... ever, and definitely had a part in my inspiration for the story. Please read it, and give the man his dues!

So I guess all I have left to say is: I'm back?

Oh! Also, read and review please!

Love,

Blind

End
file.